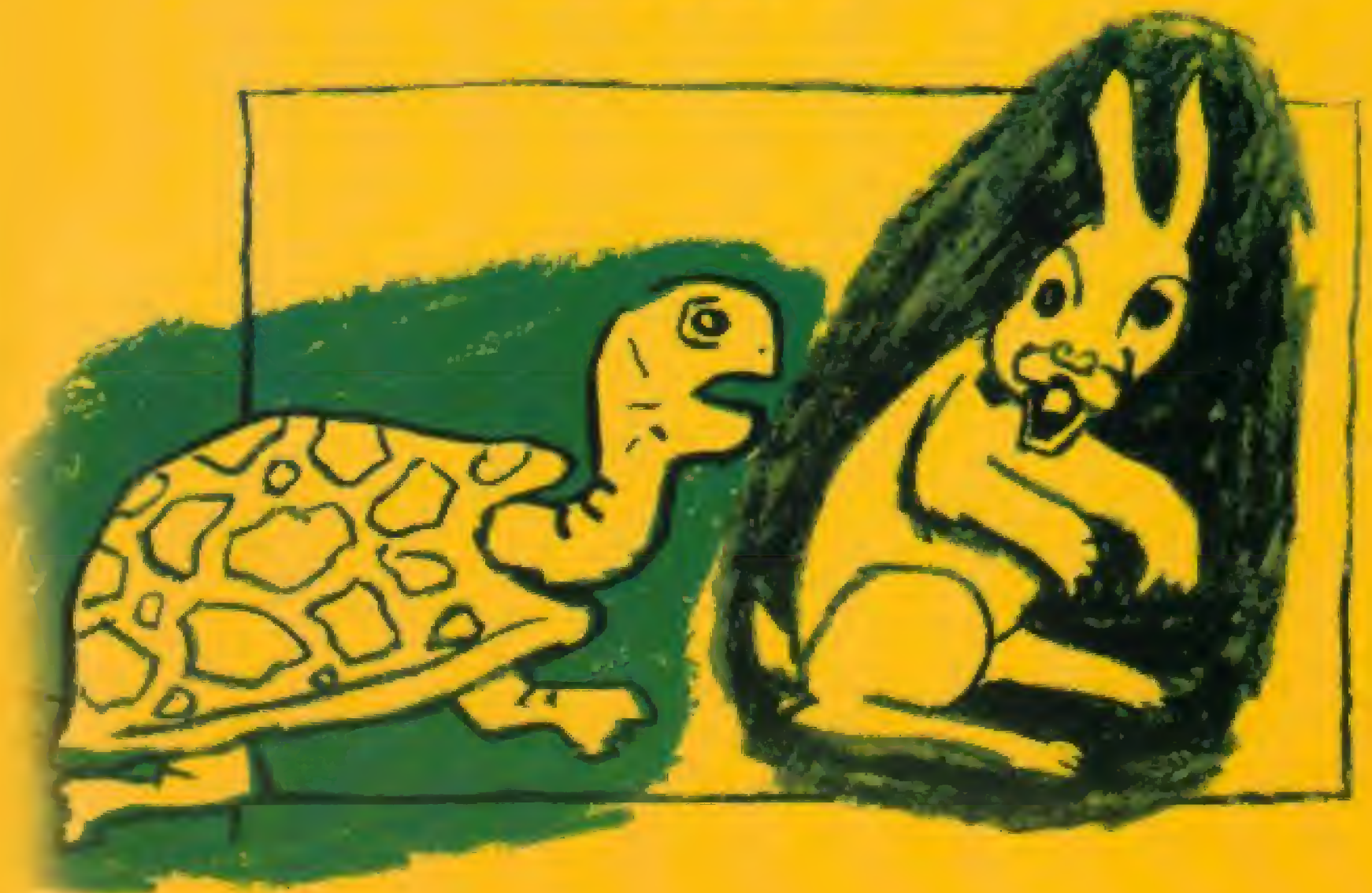


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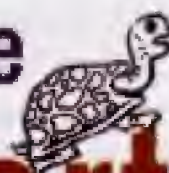
Illustrations by  
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# The Tortoise and the Hare



*Nehru Bal Pustakalaya*

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## Foreword to the Original Edition

It is a rare privilege for us to be able to present to readers in English the last book written by Dr Zakir Husain in Urdu before his death. He was an eminent educationist and thinker. This story is, in the words of the late President, “a children’s story for adults”. Playing on the theme of the famous Aesop’s fable, it is written simply but with a sophistication and wit few could equal. It is set in the contemporary Indian scene with many references to current controversies over language and religion. Gently moralistic, it makes absorbing reading from beginning to end. Shri Khushwant Singh’s translation has done ample justice to this excellent little story.

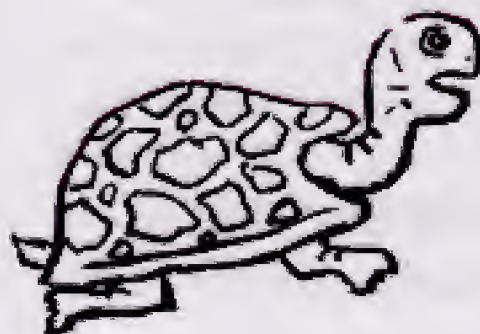
I am sure readers will enjoy the story in English as much as those who read the original in Urdu.

New Delhi  
19 June 1970

B.V. Keskar  
Secretary, NBT



## THE TORTOISE AND THE HARE



About five miles from India's capital city of Delhi, on the right bank of the river Yamuna, is a small village called Okhla. At one time anglers from Delhi made it their base. About twenty-five years ago, a band of crazy people decided to settle in this village and open a school there. We do not know what spirit possessed them but we do know that they had no money and had to live in tents on an open plot of land. Although they did not have a *paisa* in their pockets, they began to raise homes and big buildings. They did not bother to think how they would get them finished—but began sharing their half-completed homes with boarders of their school. At the time these homes had no doors; the wind blew through one and whistled its way out of the other. Nothing deterred them, however. They may have looked a timid, simple-minded lot, but in fact they were a determined band of workers with only one thing in their minds—their school. The more they put their minds and bodies to the task, the more they accomplished. And soon they had an enormous complex of buildings ready. People from distant parts of the



country came to see it and took their children to study there. For some years people mocked this band of workers: often the workers laughed at themselves for having launched on so mad a venture with so little to see it through.

During the monsoon, the Yamuna often spills over its banks. As far as the eye can see, there is nothing save an expanse of water. But when the flood subsides, one can go over the bridge to a dam made of wooden planks



designed to divert the water into a canal. Below this dam is a stretch of sand. Here you may meet parties of school children. You may also meet a big Tortoise. He is as large and as strong as a fortress. He puts his head out of the water, surveys the bank and if the coast is clear, will come out of the river and take a few majestic steps on the sand.

Maulvi Ghufraan, a teacher from the local school, was in the habit of strolling along the river. He walked fast as he believed that this kept him slim. His eyes were usually fixed on the ground and he seldom looked up to see the beauty of the landscape, lest it divert him from his plan to make his walk a weight-reducing exercise.

The Tortoise had often seen Maulvi Ghufraan pass that way. He was fascinated by Maulvi Sahib's glossy black beard, his sparkling eyes and the



glow on his ruddy cheeks. Maulvi Sahib appeared to be a man of wisdom. A problem had been worrying the Tortoise for many days and it suddenly occurred to him that he should ask Maulvi Sahib about it.

So one day, the Tortoise stepped up to speak to Maulvi Sahib. Maulvi Sahib came along at his usual time. But at the last minute, the Tortoise lost nerve. The teacher passed on without noticing the Tortoise.

The Tortoise was very depressed that his own timidity had prevented him from asking a simple question. So the next day, he emerged from the stream earlier than usual to ensure that he would not miss the teacher.

Maulvi Ghufuran was so punctual that you could set your clock by the time of his arrival. As usual, he was in a hurry. Before the poor Tortoise could open his mouth, the teacher was many yards away. The Tortoise mustered all his courage and called out in his hoarse voice, "Mullaji, O Mullaji!"

Maulvi Ghufuran paused and looked up at the sky; he thought it was a voice from the heavens, and his heart missed a beat. Contrary to his habit, he looked all around him. But he could see no one. "It must be Satan up to his old tricks," he thought to himself and continued on his way.

The Tortoise screamed with all his might, "O Mullaji, forgive me! I have a small problem and need your help."

Maulvi Sahib turned round and saw the Tortoise with his massive shell of steel and horn slowly advance towards him. The poor fellow was out of breath but obviously determined to get an answer to his problem.

Maulvi Ghufuran waited patiently for the Tortoise. "What do you want? Speak up," commanded the teacher.

The Tortoise came to a halt. "Mullaji, *namastey!* I have a *prashna* for you. Please spare me a moment."

"Certainly! But I am getting late. Quickly say whatever you have to. But what exactly is a *prashna*?" asked Maulvi Ghufuran.

"A *prashna* is something one asks," replied the Tortoise. "We all have our own language."





"I see," remarked the teacher. "Well, then, what is it you want to ask me?"

"I have got a little out of breath trying to catch up with you," said the Tortoise. "If you would take a step or two towards me, it would help. It is a very important matter for me. As soon as I finished the worship of the morning sun, I came here in your *prateeksha*."

"Pray, what kind of animal or thing is *prateeksha*?" demanded the teacher.

"Mullaji, it is in your *prateeksha* that I have been squatting along your *marg*."

"In my language, *marg* means death. So you have been waiting for me to die? That's very nice of you, no doubt!" said Maulvi Sahib in a voice loaded



with sarcasm. "Pandit Tortoiseji, how have I harmed you to have you impatiently await my demise?"

"I understand this word 'await'. It is the same as *prateeksha*. Mullaji, it's all a trick of words. They mean the same thing."

"Oh I see!" exclaimed Maulvi Sahib. "So *prateeksha* and await mean the same thing. Why then do you await my demise so eagerly? What have I done to you, O Pandit?"

"You misunderstand me, Mullaji," protested the Tortoise. "It's all a matter of words. When I said *marg* which is the same as *path*—*path* is the same as...."

Mullaji interrupted him, "*Path* that is path that is...the way. I follow." Mullaji felt a little ashamed of his impatience and spoke more gently. "Do I understand that what you meant to say was that you were looking for me, waiting for me? You may now present your question, so that I can answer you and proceed on my way."

"Mullaji, question means and answer means...."

"Brother Tortoise," remonstrated the teacher gently, "I am getting very late. If I had known earlier, I would have brought my lexicon."

"What is a lexicon?" asked the Tortoise.

"Listen, dear Tortoise, a question—or a *prashna*, as you choose to describe it—is something that is asked and an answer is something that is given. And a lexicon is something in which the meaning of words is written down."

"I understand," said the Tortoise. "Question alias *prashna*, answer alias reply. These things we learnt from our forefathers who lived at a time when the Yamuna flowed past Nilokheri and great Muslim saints came round before sunrise for their ablutions. Our ancestors used to listen to their conversations; some of the words they used have been handed down the generation of tortoises. So we know that meaning means meaning, lexicon means dictionary, i.e., a book which contains meanings of words. Yes, yes, now I understand."





"That is very good," agreed Maulvi Ghufran. Tomorrow when I come this way, I shall bring a dictionary, that is a lexicon. Now if you permit me...."

"What is the great hurry?" protested the Tortoise. "See how in this very short time so many words from our respective vocabularies have been exchanged! If we discourse more with each other, I shall surely understand the meaning of your words, as no doubt you will understand the import of mine."

"All right, Shri Tortoiseji, now let us have your question or *prashna*, as you prefer to call it."

"The *prashna* is this: what do your books of history or other books have to say about an event which took place a long time ago concerning a race between a tortoise and a hare? And if there was such a race, who do they say won it?"

Maulvi Ghufran was charmed by the simplicity of the 'Tortoise's' vocabulary and the gentle way he lisped his words. But he was up against a problem of ancient history; besides the subject he taught was theology, which had very little to do with dogs, cats, hares or tortoises. But he was a kind, honest man. He replied:

"Pandit Tortoiseji, to tell you the truth, I do not know the answer. Only a scholar of ancient history could give you the right reply. If you like, tomorrow I shall bring along the Head of the Department of History of our university. You can ask him anything about ancient history. Now if you will permit me, I must be on my way. I am already very late."

"Certainly, Mullaji! Forgive me for detaining you. I will await your arrival tomorrow. Did I use the right word 'await'?"

"Quite correct. Whatever one understands is correct. Till tomorrow then."



For some time Pandit Tortoise Ram remained lost in thought, pondering over various problems, then slowly he turned back towards the river.

The next day, Pandit Tortoise Ram emerged from the Yamuna well before the appointed time. Maulvi Ghufraan was punctual as ever. With him was Professor Kipchaq, a wiry, lean man carrying a thin, crooked cane which he restlessly twirled in his hand and occasionally kicked with his toes. He had a strange way of jerking his neck. It appeared as if he was talking to himself. Whenever he thought that he had made an important point, he emphasised it by a jerk of his head. When he stood still, his fingers tapped the head of the cane as if it was the key-board of a harmonium. In short, he was a fascinating man.

This morning, Maulvi Ghufraan was on the lookout for the Tortoise. As soon as he espied him, he said very loudly, "*As-salam-valai-kum*—peace be upon you."

"Greetings, Panditji!" said Professor Kipchaq.

"*Namastey!*" replied Pandit Tortoise Ram. "May you prosper. It is good to see you. My heart rejoices."

"Oho!" exclaimed Maulana Ghufraan, "I forgot to bring the dictionary—or the lexicon as you call it. But we understood each other's greetings and good wishes. Now you may present your problem—I mean your *prashna*. Professor Kipchaq is a renowned authority on ancient history. He will give you the *uttar*—that is, reply to your question."

"Professor Kipchaqji," said the Tortoise in his grave, gentle tone. "There is a problem which has been bothering me for many days; I put it to Mullaji yesterday but he admitted that he did not know the answer. So I put it to you. Is it true that in some historic past, there was a race between the race of tortoises and the race of hares? And if so, who was the victor and who the vanquished? Amongst us tortoise folk, it is believed that such a race did take place and that our forefather won it."



Prof. Kipchag

Maulvi  
Ghufran





Professor Kipchaq was offended. He thought the Tortoise had mistaken him for a spinner of children's fairy tales. Or else the morning breeze had gone to the Tortoise's head and he was trying to be facetious. After a prolonged silence, the Professor replied, "Mr Tortoise, what have I to do with tortoises and hares? I am a teacher of history."

The Tortoise was taken aback; he did not have the courage to bandy words with an eminent Professor. He asked Mullaji hesitantly: "Mullaji, what's happened? The Professor seems somewhat annoyed. I crave forgiveness and will not pester him with any more questions. As they say, silence is golden."

Maulvi Ghufran was a gentle, soft-spoken man. He began to feel very sorry for the Tortoise. He did not realise that on the previous evening, a young man had heckled Professor Kipchaq over some matter of ancient ritual and the Professor had been out of sorts ever since. Anyone who has had a sleepless night and is hauled out of bed early next morning for an academic confrontation is bound to be testy. Moreover, the Professor did not particularly relish the company of old people and the prospect of facing an aged Pandit, after the previous night's encounter with the young man, was more than he could stomach in one morning. Maulvi Ghufran did his best to assuage the Professor's hurt feelings.

"My dear Professor, I am afraid you've misunderstood us," he said. "Pandit Tortoiseji had no intention whatsoever of making fun of you. If there is anyone to blame, it is I."

"I crave your pardon," said the Tortoise. "How could I ever dare to make fun of you? How rare it is for one as lowly as I to meet an eminent scholar like yourself! But this matter of the race between the hare and the tortoise has been worrying me for a very long time. I think about it when I am in the water and I think about it when I am on land. I get no peace of mind. I am so worried that I hardly sleep. This is partly due to age, no doubt, but worrying makes it worse. However, if I have been guilty of any discourtesy, I hope you will forgive me."





While Maulvi Ghufuran and the Tortoise were pleading with him, Professor Kipchaq was twirling his cane. At long last, he broke his silence. "Maulvi Ghufuran, I am ashamed of myself. It is this wretched insomnia that has brought me to this pass. I came specially to help Pandit Tortoiseji but the way he put his question nettled me. I have no great opinion of myself but I felt that he was denigrating the entire discipline of history by insinuating that it concerned itself with stories about dogs, cats, tortoises and hares. Regarding this matter of the famous race between the tortoise and the hare, I suggest you consult your friend the Professor of

Ancient Culture, Civilisation and Literature. Now we must go back. I have lots of things to attend to."

Maulvi Ghufuran smiled and said to the Tortoise, "The Professor wants to apologise, i.e., beg pardon. And he has given us sound advice; we should put your question to the Professor of Ancient Culture, Civilisation and Literature. I'll do my best to bring him with me tomorrow morning."

"Maulvi Sahib, what is this literature you speak of?" asked the Tortoise.

"It's very hard to explain. It's something which tells in sweet words the innermost thoughts of great minds. It can be sweeter than sugarcane candy. It can be as powerful as a great river in flood. It can break hearts, shake lofty mountains. Stories written in that kind of language are handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. The words are so cunningly strung together that they arouse our deepest emotions, make people burst into song. It reflects mankind in its true elements, as if in a mirror. It warms the heart, instils courage, reveals all our shortcomings. And it does lots of



other things for humanity. I am only a teacher of theology, so I don't know too much about it—except that all this kind of thing is called literature.”

The Tortoise took this all in before he spoke. “It appears to us that the Hindi word for this thing you call literature is *sahitya*.”

“That’s quite right, Pandit Tortoiseji! It must be *sahitya* or what we call *adab*. Of course, this Sahitya Akademi that we have is meant to propagate our literature. So that’s settled, *adab is sahitya*, i.e. literature.”

“Mullaji, be sure to bring your Pandit of Literature with you tomorrow morning. We’ve lost a lot of time, and I am losing more and more sleep over this vexed question. Be kind and do not fail me.”

“I promise,” replied Maulvi Sahib. They then proceeded towards the bridge.

“What a mess I’ve landed myself into!” muttered the Tortoise to himself. “However, let’s see what this *sahitya* man has to say. I put them a simple, straightforward question and they tie themselves in knots. I wonder what kind of learning these human beings go in for these days!”

Maulvi Ghufuran found himself engrossed in the Tortoise’s problem. As soon as he returned to the campus, instead of going for his bath and breakfast as was his wont, he made his way to the house of Dr Philfor. The Doctor was surprised to see Maulvi Sahib so early in the day. The Doctor was given to smoking his hookah-pipe in the mornings; he believed it helped his digestion. He often dozed while smoking and had to skip his bath. He was not very keen on bathing. He was still at his pipe when Maulvi Sahib arrived. “What brings your august feet to honour the abode of this humble creature?” he asked in his usual polite but florid language. “Please enter. Welcome and welcome again. I hope you will have breakfast; then I may also partake of the repast.”

“Aren’t you well? Don’t you eat when you are alone?” asked Maulana Ghufuran.

“It’s the same old complaint,” replied the Doctor. “It’s been with me all my





life. It's the mother of all diseases. Sometimes I do not go for a week. Once in seven days my bowels may move and I have a clearance."

"We can discuss the matter of diet and constipation another day," said Maulvi Ghufan turning up his nose. "Today I have to trouble you about another question. As you know, every morning I take a stroll by the river. I've made the acquaintance of a tortoise...."

"A tortoise!" exclaimed the Doctor. "Did I really hear you say you've made friends with a tortoise? That's really bizarre! I commend you for the use of the word 'acquaintance'."

"Doctor, you misunderstand me. There is no need for any commendation," protested Maulvi Ghufan. "We met and we conversed. He is a kind-hearted old fellow. He is in an awful fix. He put his problem to me but I could not help him as it was not concerned with my discipline but with literature. The next day, I took Professor Kipchaq with me. The poor fellow presented the same question to the Professor. But the Professor considered it a personal affront as well as an aspersion on his discipline."

"How can I help you, pray?"

"When Professor Kipchaq cooled down he suggested that as the matter concerned fables and legends, some authority on literature should be consulted. So I have come straight to you. If you will be good enough to accompany me on my morning walk tomorrow, the poor old Tortoise will surely be grateful."

"But what does he want to know?"

"In ancient times, there was apparently a race run between a tortoise and a hare. He wants to know authoritatively whether this is a legend or a fact, and if it is a fact, who won the race."

"Aha, it's the same old Aesop's fable! I shall be happy to go with you. It's



good I asked you about it now. You see, with all the reading I have to do, my mind gets somewhat muddled—perhaps my wretched constipation has something to do with it. I will consult my notes nearer the time; then I can answer his question fully.”

“Thank you, I must be off now. I’ll call for you tomorrow morning.”

The next morning, the Professor said his prayers and hurried to the Doctor’s quarters. The Doctor was still in bed. Maulana Ghufraan rattled the chain outside the door, then called out. The Doctor rose rubbing sleep out of his eyes. He splashed water on his face and slipped his feet into a battered pair of rubber-soled shoes, relics of bygone days when he used to take a morning walk. He came out and joined the Maulana.

The Tortoise had been waiting for a long time. He walked lumberingly up to greet them. The Maulana said, “As promised, I have brought a most knowledgeable scholar with me. He knows just about everything there is to know. You can present your problem to him.”

“O revered and learned Pandit!” said the Tortoise addressing Doctor Philfor. “The *prashna* is this: I am told that your books of learning have recorded at various places that in ages gone by there was a race between a tortoise and a hare. If that is so, who do they say won the race? Tell me truthfully and precisely what was the outcome of that contest. Tell me the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Don’t spare my feelings.”

Doctor Philfor was Professor of Literature but the Tortoise’s Hindi mode of address, ‘learned Pandit’ and the use of the word *prashna* irked him. He looked questioningly towards Maulana Ghufraan. The Maulana gauged his linguistic difficulties. “‘O revered Pandit’ is only the Hindi form of address,” he assured the Doctor. “And you must have realised that *prashna* is simply the Hindi synonym for question.”

“Yes, I do comprehend,” replied the Doctor. “Your problem is most absorbing and all its different aspects must be carefully considered. To put it briefly, tales of animals and of animals and humans, are an old literary form



popular specially in ancient India and Greece. We also come across this genre of writing in the literature of some other nations. But India and Greece excelled in it. In Greece, they are ascribed to one Aesop. In India, most of them can be traced back to Buddhist times and are known as Jataka tales. They are associated with the nativity of Gautama the Buddha."

The Doctor's short dissertation had a strange effect on the Tortoise. He reverently closed his eyes as if in deep meditation. The Maulana felt that a long and learned discourse on the genesis of animal tales was not quite the thing for a tortoise. He gently reprimanded the Doctor: "We need not go to such lengths on the subject; just answer the Tortoise's question to his satisfaction."

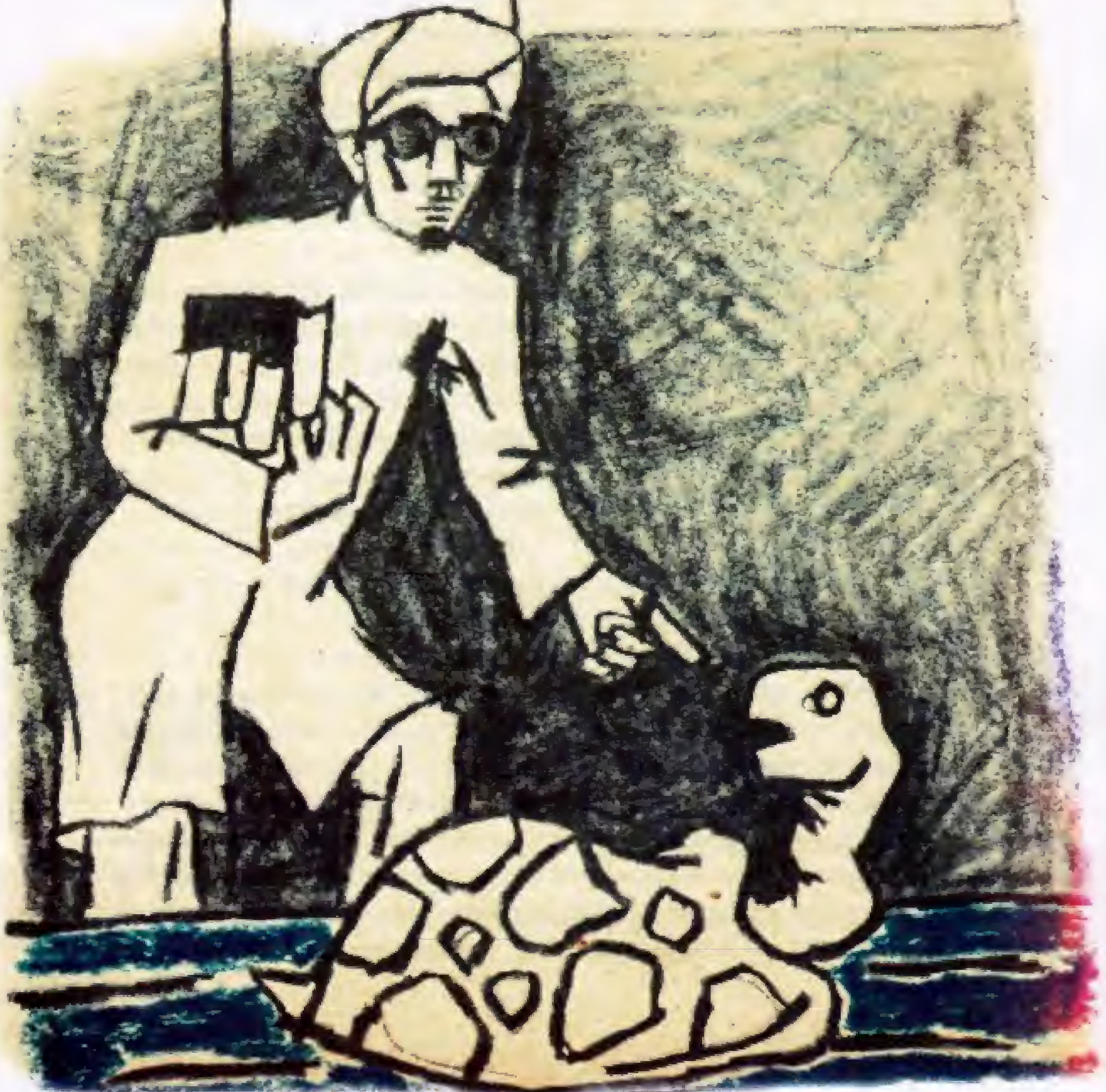
Doctor Philfor replied, "If you will forgive my saying so, Maulana Sahib, I do not like to be interrupted. I have already told you that my constipation has adversely affected my memory. Accumulation of too much knowledge has also created a kind of mental block. Different kinds of knowledge create confusion. That's why I make copious notes. I consulted them last night on this very topic. If you keep interrupting me, my mind may wander. You must take my word that all I am telling you is strictly relevant. Let me proceed with my answer to Mr Tortoise and kindly refrain from further interruption. Yes, as I was saying....Now what was I saying? It's gone completely out of my head."

"Something about the Jataka tales and someone called Aesop," reminded Maulana Ghufraan meekly. "But pray do not let the flood of your learning drown the question posed by this poor Tortoise."

The Doctor retorted sharply, "I am a D. Lit. I am charged with the dissemination of literature; I live by learning. If I were to tell you all I know of the genesis of folk tales or even of animal tales, you could blame me. But the truth of the matter is that in the study of literature it has now become unnecessary to devote attention not only to stories of animals but even to literary masterpieces. It is the duty of scholars to trace problems back to their very beginnings and decipher hidden meanings of value to individuals



# Doctor Philfor





and to society. We research scholars spend our lives in this pursuit. Just as you have to know the circumstances in which a poet was reared before you can correctly interpret his poetry, so you must know the background of his society, and the stage of its historical evolution. These are rare gems which we must dive for. Nothing else seems to have any value!"

The Tortoise had again shut his eyes. Maulana Ghufuran spoke impatiently, "Let's forget it! Don't tell me that in your great discipline, there is no such thing as a straight answer to a very straight and simple question!"

"And what precisely do you mean by that?"

"Only this: what is the truth regarding this business of the tortoise and the hare?"

"Maulana Sahib, listen very carefully. The truth of the matter is that in these tales, animals have been used as symbols. Virtues and vices are clothed in animal form. For example, lion for courage, wolf for greed, fox for deceit, lamb for innocence. They have a powerful impact on the undeveloped minds of children. They are put in comic situations which are particularly fascinating to the young."

"My dear Doctor, I am most impressed by your learning and diction," replied Maulvi Ghufuran sarcastically, "but how long do you expect us to be lost in the maze of your knowledge and argument? Pray tell us in one single word who won the race, the tortoise or the hare?"

"Sir, there is always a tale within a tale; there is neither victor nor vanquished. As the tale is told, the hare lost and the tortoise won. But there were many pre-conditions to the race. In the course of the race, the hare fell asleep; the tortoise was on the move all the time. If the hare is the symbol of speed and the tortoise of the absence thereof, the outcome would be all too obvious. On the other hand, if the hare is used by the storyteller to symbolise over-confidence or carelessness born of hubris and the tortoise to symbolise untiring perseverance born of humility, then there is a stronger reason to accept the verdict in the tortoise's favour. It is not for me to prejudge the



issue. If you are willing to hear more on the subject, I shall tell you. I am not well-acquainted with the hare as a species, as I have not had the time to study all that has been published on the subject. But take the tortoise. He is closer to the people of the American and Asian continents. It is on the tortoise's back that we envisaged the world we live in. The Mundas worship him. Others use him for sacrifice. In Madagascar and Java, people believe that if a tortoise is forced out of water, there will be a typhoon. In the later Vedas, we find the tortoise portrayed as a god. In the *Yajurveda*, the tortoise becomes the ruler of the seas; in the *Atharvaveda*, he is called Kashyapa. He has all the qualities of self-procreation, he is *swayambhu*—self-generator. It is written in the *Satpatha Brahmana* that after *Prajapati* had created all the creatures of the earth, he assumed a tortoise-like incarnation. It is probably for this reason that the Hindus have given the tortoise a place in their pantheon of gods and worship him as an incarnation of Vishnu.”

Maulana Ghufuran looked impatient. The Doctor raised his finger to warn him against further interruption and continued with his discourse. “You may not know that the ancient Chinese read celestial messages from the shell of the tortoise.”

“Celestial messages! You mean from the heavens? God forbid!”

“That’s right, they read messages from the skies in the tortoise’s shell. And in order to do so, they used a special variety of ink. The poor tortoise, however, had to sacrifice his life in the cause of this heavenly knowledge because he had to be deprived of his shell. As for the ink, it has a fascinating tale of its own. If you like I can tell you all about it as we walk back home.”

“For God’s sake, no! I have had enough of the past. And now you want to bring in this business of ink. Instead of a straight answer to a straight question, you’ve ensnared us in a cat’s cradle. I am so sick of all this, I could throw up like one stricken with cholera. Normally I have loose bowels but today you have constipated me with information.”



Dr Philfor ignored the Maulana's tirade. "What was I saying? Tell me quick—or I'll lose the trend of my thought."

Maulana Ghufraan gave up. "You were saying something about Chinese ink. I don't recall what bearing all this has on the tortoise and the hare."

"Again that hare! I have already told you that I have not studied the hare adequately. But by now you should have guessed how much I know of the tortoise. The Chinese poured a kind of ink on the inside of the tortoise's shell to read the future. In short, Maulana Sahib, this tortoise is a strange creature."

"For God's sake, spare us," pleaded Maulana Ghufraan. "Forgive the poor old Tortoise and your humble servant; we erred grievously in troubling you. Please, please forgive us."

"There is no reason to be upset," assured Dr Philfor. "You honoured a humble scholar such as I by consulting me on this important problem. I have told you all I know."

"Just a minute," he cautioned after a pause, "I overlooked mentioning one fact. You used the words 'poor' and 'old' for your friend the Tortoise. How long do you think tortoises live? Between three and four hundred years! Your friend is still young; he has at least another 150 to 200 years to go. Tortoises live a long, long...."

"Enough is enough!" snapped Maulana Ghufraan. "Let's not start on the age of tortoises."

"If you are not prepared to listen to me, I will leave at once," exclaimed Dr Philfor, walking away. The Tortoise, who had been lost in his own thoughts while this discourse and argument were being bandied, had now fallen asleep. The sudden silence roused him. It often happens that one sleeps through noise and is woken by its cessation.

"Mullaji, has he left? I just dozed off for a moment. Please forgive me," he said on awaking. "Please get me out of this predicament. I have already given you enough trouble; and you have been good enough to bring Professor



Sahib and Doctor Sahib to me. But it seems to me that they did not understand my problem. Or maybe I did not comprehend what they were saying."

"Brother Tortoise Ramji, that's exactly what's bothering me!" exclaimed Maulana Ghufra. "When the Doctor was orating on all manner of things, I was wondering how what he was saying could possibly solve your problem. I realise that people who read too many books get entombed under their tomes and volumes of information and lose the faculty of reasoning. I must find someone who can use his own brain and answer your question, I mean your *prashna*."

"Yes, please Mullaji, as soon as you can, *Ishwara* will bless you. I have taken you into my heart."

"Tomorrow I will bring another of my colleagues. He is the Professor of Philosophy. Thought and reason are his business."

The real name of the Professor in question was Allah Ditta—the gift of *Allah*. He was from Punjab but had been educated in Jaunpur and Lucknow. Living in these parts, he became uneasy with his Punjabi name, and changed it to Maula Baksh—which means the same thing—the gift of the Master. Before he came to Maulana Ghufra's school, he used to sell biscuits and rent out furniture. He made the biscuits himself. He never wrote down what was due to him but made a mental note of it. Whenever a student leaving college owed him money, he immediately impounded all his furniture to recoup himself. When Maula Baksh first came to the institution, he asked the Principal that his name be entered in the records as 'Al Phailsuph al Hindi'. He had that name printed on his calling cards. From that day, he was 'Al Phailsuph al Hindi'. Only a few people knew of his having been Allah Ditta and Maula Baksh.

Doctor Philfor's lengthy discourse had delayed Maulana Ghufra. He had a lot to do at school and at home. It was only in the evening that he was able to go to Al Phailsuph al Hindi, and tell him all that had passed between him



and the Tortoise—and between them and Professor Kipchaq and Doctor Philfor. He expressed his deep regard for the Tortoise and begged Al Phailsuph al Hindi to help the old Tortoise out of his predicament.

Al Phailsuph listened with rapt attention before he replied, "Let me make it quite clear—it's always best to be quite clear—I have nothing whatsoever to do with tales and legends or literature of any kind. This is the age of reason and I believe in keeping my mind clear of cobwebs. I will find the answer with my own innate faculty of reasoning and if I can prove by that power of logic that it is probable or possible for the tortoise to have won the race, I will convey the good tidings to your friend. You can never rely on legend. First let me get the problem clear; if there is a race between a tortoise and a hare, which of them will win? If I am given no further information and have to deal solely with the question, then I can say that either could win. Let us assume that a hare is a fast runner and a tortoise slow on its feet. Nevertheless if this assumption is based only on observation and probability, we cannot base any firm, infallible conclusions on that probability. Our observations often lie; they deceive us every day—morning and evening. A mirage makes sand dunes appear like a stretch of water; the sun appears to be circling round the earth. Maulana Ghufraan, I promise to think over this problem at night. I will accompany you in the morning and make acquaintance with your friend, the Tortoise."

\* \* \*

Early next morning, Maulana Ghufraan went to Al Phailsuph al Hindi's house and the two proceeded to the river. The Tortoise awaited them. He greeted them with a broad smile. "Welcome Mullaji, and to you, revered Sir, I also extend my welcome."

"This is my friend, Al Phailsuph al Hindi," said Maulana Ghufraan introducing the two. "I have told him about the *prashna* that has been



torturing your mind. He has thought about it and will tell you all there is to know."

"I touch your feet," said the Tortoise bowing towards Al Phailsuph al Hindi. "There is not very much to my *prashna*. Just tell me who won—the tortoise or the hare? If you can tell me for certain that the tortoise won, I will take on a hare tomorrow."

"Mister Tortoise, you are a friend of my friend Maulvi Ghufraan who has told me of your problem," replied Al Phailsuph al Hindi. "But I am afraid I cannot tell you who won. I was not present at the race. And even if I had been there watching it, how could I state with any measure of certainty that what I had seen with my eyes was right? Eyes can deceive. I suggest that you keep the outcome of the race out of the debate. As far as I am concerned, the result is of no consequence. The crux of the matter can be put thus: if you and the hare were to run against each other, who would be the winner? Not who won but who will win. There can be three possible alternatives: first, the hare is faster on its legs than you and you run at your usual pace. In that case, you will lose and the hare win."

The Tortoise took a deep breath. His eyes became moist. "So all that I have been told is a lie. It's the hare who will win."

"Don't be impatient, Mister Tortoise," exclaimed Al Phailsuph al Hindi. "I have only stated the first proposition. It is subject to many provisos."

"Surely this is the bitter truth! My defeat is ensured."

"No, Sir, be patient. The second alternative is that we assume that you walk faster than the hare and you both start the race simultaneously. In that event, you will win."

"Mullaji," pleaded the Tortoise, turning to Maulana Ghufraan, "is he making fun of me? If I could fulfil this condition, why should I have bothered to ask you this question?"

"No, Mister Tortoise, there is yet another alternative," said Al Phailsuph al Hindi. "The hare runs fast and you jog along lazily, but you keep on



moving. The hare stops on his way to take a nap. And if he does not get up in time to resume the race, then, despite your slow pace, you will win."

The Tortoise turned to Maulana Ghufuran appealingly, "Mullaji, why on earth should he take a nap? Who is there to lull him to sleep?"

Al Pha





Maulana Ghufraan asked Al Phailsuph al Hindi, "Can't you pose some assumption by which our notions of the relative speeds of the hare and the tortoise be such as to ensure the Tortoise's victory?"

"You have not yet heard all I have to say. Besides I have not acquired my

mastery of logic in vain. Do you think I am unable to posit an assumption that will ensure victory for the Tortoise?"

The Tortoise began to look more cheerful. "Please revered Sir, enlighten me further."

Al Phailsuph al Hindi continued his discourse. "Let us assume—as you would have us assume—and there is no reason to assume that a hare must always be quick-footed and the tortoise drag-footed. But for the sake of argument, let's admit that such is the case. Now I put it to you, this race that you talk about, will it take place on dry land or under water?"

Maulana Ghufraan interrupted him, "Sir, you present us with some premise by which although the race were run on dry land and although we are correct in our

*Al Phailsuph al Hindi*





surmise that the hare is fast and the tortoise slow, the issue would be decided in favour of the tortoise."

"There is one such premise. But you must understand the conditions that are attached to the premise. These are as follows:

The direction of the race must be clearly stated.

The time of the race must be clearly stated.

Both the tortoise and the hare must run according to their respective speeds without any stops whatsoever.

And above all, at the outset of the race, the tortoise must get a short start, even if it is as little as one yard.

"And now listen very attentively and try to comprehend what I say. Imagine there are two bodies or things—A and B, both in one straight line. One in front, the other behind. The distance between them is D. A and B move ahead according to their respective speeds. Now it is clear that whatever the speed at which the body B travels, slow or fast, as long as it sticks to its predetermined path, it must cover a certain distance, however great or small."

"But pray enlighten us, what relevance has all this to the tortoise and the hare?"

"I have explained it already. If we take B to be the tortoise and keep it continuously moving forward, then between it and the other body A, *i.e.* the hare, there will always be a certain distance. A, *i.e.*, the hare, will never be able to catch up with B, *i.e.*, the tortoise. Consequently, B must be the winner."

Maulana Ghufraan gaped helplessly at Al Phailsuph al Hindi. Signs of pleasure were apparent on the Tortoise's face. He spoke with some diffidence: "Mullaji, I have not understood everything our revered friend has said, but it would appear that victory would surely be ours. How would it affect his argument if he were only to state explicitly that the tortoise will win?"

Al Phailsuph al Hindi smiled, to exhibit any more pleasure was against



the dignity of his discipline. "I have made everything crystal clear. And still you request me to expound the matter fully. Mullaji, if you wish to put the hare in A's place, you may do so. And the tortoise at B. The distance between them—a yard or so—be D. Let the race begin. If Mister Tortoise continues to run at his usual pace without stopping anywhere or falling asleep, he will win. This, my power of reasoning says, is inevitable. There is no room for faulty observation nor the uncertainty of conjecture in this proposition."

"Do you understand this, Pandit Tortoise Ram?" asked Maulana Ghufuran. "Hurl your challenge. But don't forget that at the commencement of the race, you must be one yard ahead or, let's say for safety's sake, two yards ahead of the hare. He will never be able to go past. Our friend Al Phailsuph al Hindi is a man of great foresight; we cannot be expected to see that far."

"Mullaji, you ask him to say just once that we tortoises will win," pleaded the Tortoise.

"Now look, Pandit Tortoise Ram," the Philosopher said, "I do not have any truck with fantasies. Why should so-and-so or so-and-so be asked to say so-and-so? How do I know whether it is the hare or the tortoise that will win? If the race is run according to the plan that I have outlined before you, then B will win. If Mullaji chooses to make you B and you are brave enough to accept his choice, the pre-conditions I have laid down will be fulfilled and the victory will be yours. But if these pre-conditions are not fulfilled, then the whole thing falls to the ground. That would be the end of the episode of the hare and the tortoise. A completely new plan would have to be devised."

"Have we erred in any way that you should in a trice reduce all our hopes to ashes?" pleaded the Tortoise, turning to Maulvi Ghufuran. "I do not understand all his words but from his use of the phrase 'end of the episode', I gather he means reducing all our hopes to ashes. Hare into ashes, Tortoise into ashes."

"No, Pandit Tortoiseji, that's not what he means at all," said Maulvi



Ghufran, "only the pressure of your *prashna* has been too much for his brain. But he has made it all very clear. If you do as we have told you, you will certainly be the winner. Only don't forget to start a yard or two ahead of the hare."

"If he forgets that pre-condition, the whole plan falls to pieces. If the pre-condition is not there, there is no pre-conditioned victor. Now if you will allow me, I must leave; you two can continue your dialogue. I've worked up a headache. I must return home and take my brain tonic. Well, peace be upon you and may God protect you!"

"All right, you may go," replied Maulana Ghufran. "We'll be seeing each other soon. Many thanks. You've done us a very great service. You will agree, brother Tortoise, what a wonderful answer our Al Phailsuph al Hindi has given to your *prashna*! He blocked every avenue of escape that your *prashna* could have had. I should also be on my way. You should be rid of all your worries on the subject. If the hare is at all uppish and challenges you, don't hesitate to take up the gauntlet. Only remember the condition of starting ahead of him. You will win. You can be sure that you will win!"

Maulana Ghufran retraced his steps in a light-hearted sprightly way. He had his bath and breakfast of tea and biscuits made in the Aligarh style by the local baker, Maula Baksh. Then he left for the classroom.

After the lesson, Maulana Ghufran had to announce the results of the annual examination. He had given one of his students 55 marks out of 50. The Principal was present at the time he was making the announcement. He did not say anything before the students but as soon as Maulana Ghufran came out of the classroom, he asked, "How did you manage to extract 55 out of 50?"

"I did not extract anything out of anything," replied Maulana Ghufran. "As far as I am concerned, I only gave 55 marks."

"But, but," protested the Principal, "the total was only 50."

"That's right. But what was I to do? When I read through Jamil's



answerbook, he had all the answers correct. So I gave him 50. Then when I saw Safi's book, he also had all the answers right. However, his writing was much better than Jamil's and his approach to the problems was also superior. My only choice was to give Safi 50 and reduce Jamil's marks or give Safi some more. I felt that the first alternative would be unfair. Hence the second."

While these two were arguing. Al Phailsuph al Hindi happened to pass by. The Principal spoke to him, "Mr Philosopher, please listen to this! Maulana Ghufuran has given one of his students 55 marks out of 50. What do you say to that?"

"What can I say to that? If he has given the fellow 55, I presume that's what the fellow deserves."

"O learned one, how can anyone give more than the total? All he had to give away was 50; he's given 55. How is that possible?"

"It's possible for the simple reason that he has done so. What more proof of possibility is needed, seeing that the thing has been accomplished? No one can extract a guava from a mango. He extracted nothing from his 50. He used his judgment to give the boy 55 marks. If he had wanted to, he could have given the chap 60 or 70 or more. The question of possibility is quite irrelevant to the issue."

"Forgive me, O learned one! And you too Maulana Ghufuran, forgive me! Whatever you did must be right. I shall get back to my office to compile the final results."

The final results were compiled and declared. The school closed for its long vacations. Maulana Ghufuran and the other teachers left for their homes.

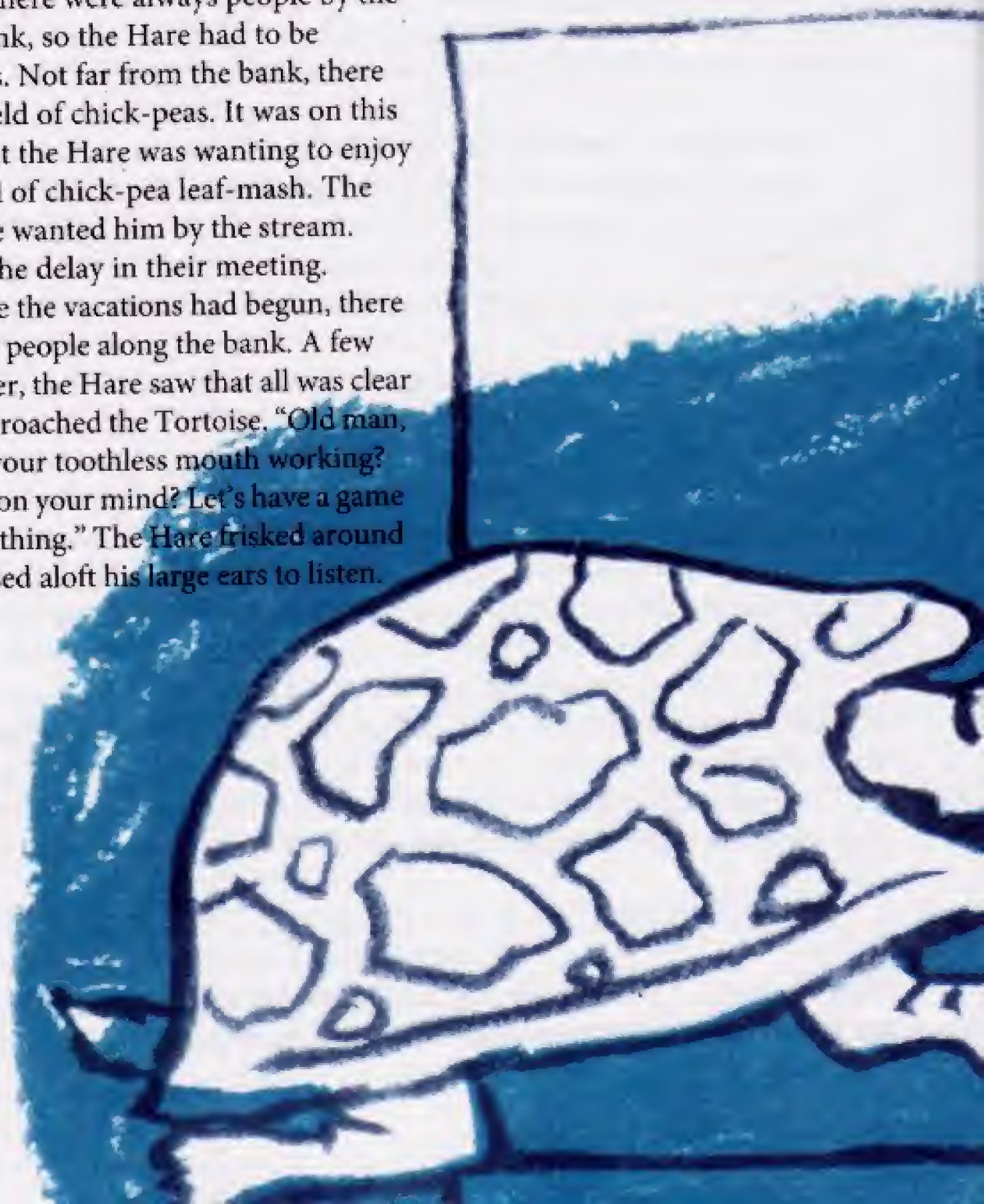
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Meanwhile, the Tortoise began to train for the big race. He was waiting for the Hare to come and make some sarcastic remark or tease him and then

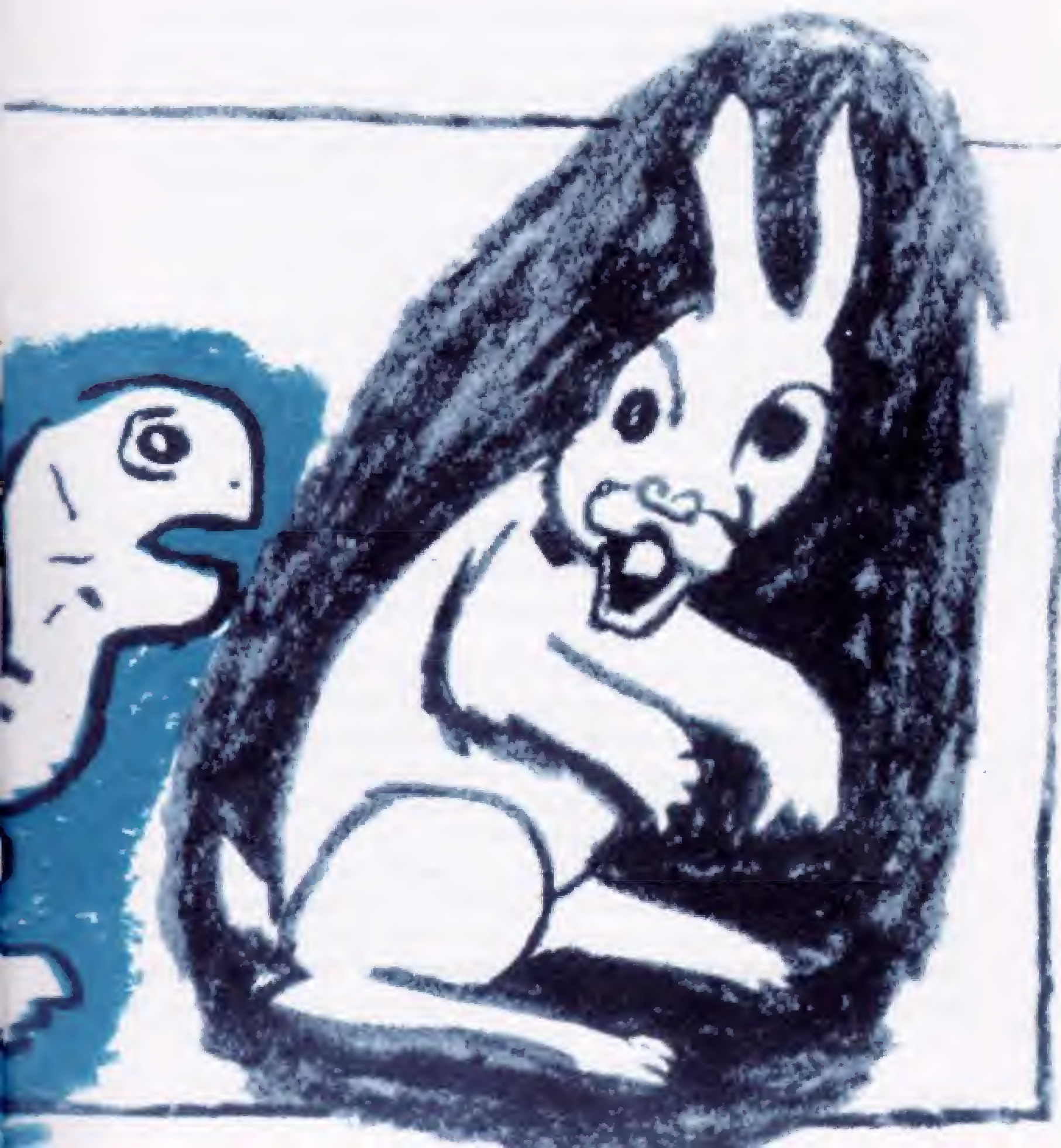


he would throw him a challenge. Many days later, the Hare happened to come along. There were always people by the river bank, so the Hare had to be cautious. Not far from the bank, there was a field of chick-peas. It was on this field that the Hare was wanting to enjoy his meal of chick-pea leaf-mash. The Tortoise wanted him by the stream. Hence the delay in their meeting.

Once the vacations had begun, there were no people along the bank. A few days later, the Hare saw that all was clear and approached the Tortoise. "Old man, how is your toothless mouth working? What's on your mind? Let's have a game of something." The Hare frisked around and raised aloft his large ears to listen.









He repeated the performance many times before the Tortoise suspected that he was trying to make fun of him.

"Prince, you are very frisky today," remarked the Tortoise. "You have no respect for your elders. When will you learn some manners?"

"Old fellow, all this swimming about in the river has filled your brain with water," replied the Hare very curtly, "that's what makes you so edgy in your speech."

"It's you who assume princely airs and talk big," retorted the Tortoise. "I live according to my principles. I have learnt good manners from my ancestors. I'd advise you to take some lessons in etiquette."

"So! You call me ill-mannered. It's you who are an ill-mannered lout. I'll teach you to hold your tongue."

"In the holy name of Rama!" exclaimed the Tortoise. "You are quick-tempered, aren't you, Mister Prince? It seems that all this green foliage you've been nibbling has created a lot of gas in your little tummy. You forget your real nature."

"Gas in your belly, Old Wind-bag! You are as inflated as a gas balloon. Balloons are always very light in the head, but you are a balloon made of solid rock. Fancy carting a castle on one's back! And just watch the ambling gait of this flat-footed rocky balloon!"

"You have always something nasty to say about the way I walk. I walk like a weighty person! Men of substance always walk the way I do. Yours the way of the scamp. A leap here, a leap there. Slinking, hiding, ears dancing up and down. Wah! What a royal gait has our beautiful princeling!"

"Okay, let's have it out. Good is that which is faster. Take me on fatso? Maybe you get winded just standing erect!"

"Race me! That's all you can think of. All right, I'll run against you. Our ancestors had such a race in times gone by. Our ancient history and literature record what transpired. Do you know what was the outcome? Your great, great, great grandfather was trounced by my sire. Mister Prince, does your memory go as far back as the days of spring?"



"Stuff and nonsense! Some foolish tale penned by an asinine pen-pusher. If these scribblers did not mix lies with what they wrote, who would read them? Falsehood makes delectable sauce for a stale story. Old fellow, life is not a tale told by an idiot. Life requires a sturdy body, strong, agile limbs, nimble feet. If you dare to run against me, you will learn better."

"As you say, Prince! Let's settle it once for all. I'll run against you. If you lose, let not your tongue wag any more. And learn to be civil in your speech."

"When will it be? Why not straightaway? Now!"

"What's the great hurry? I have some things to attend to in the river. Come tomorrow morning."

"Sure! I take it you will be alone. Not all those new friends of yours—the one with the black beard, the one with the cane and that fellow with sparkling eyes. I avoid that type; I give them a wide berth. A deceitful, cruel, bloodthirsty lot they are."

"In the holy name of Rama! Do you ever have anything nice to say about anyone? Chick-pea leaf-mash is good, all the rest is evil. Well, it's your business. You come tomorrow and I'll see that there is no one else here—just you and I and God. We'll run our race. I put my honour in the hands of *Ishwara*."

"Old fellow, you talk as if *Ishwara* was some kind of relative of yours. Your honour is in His hands and He will ignore me! However, let it be between you and your private God. All I want to make sure is that you will not back out of the race."

"We'll run from the base of this thorny acacia tree up to the other corner of the bridge yonder. I have only one condition."

"What is that?"

"I must start two yards ahead of you."

"Why?"

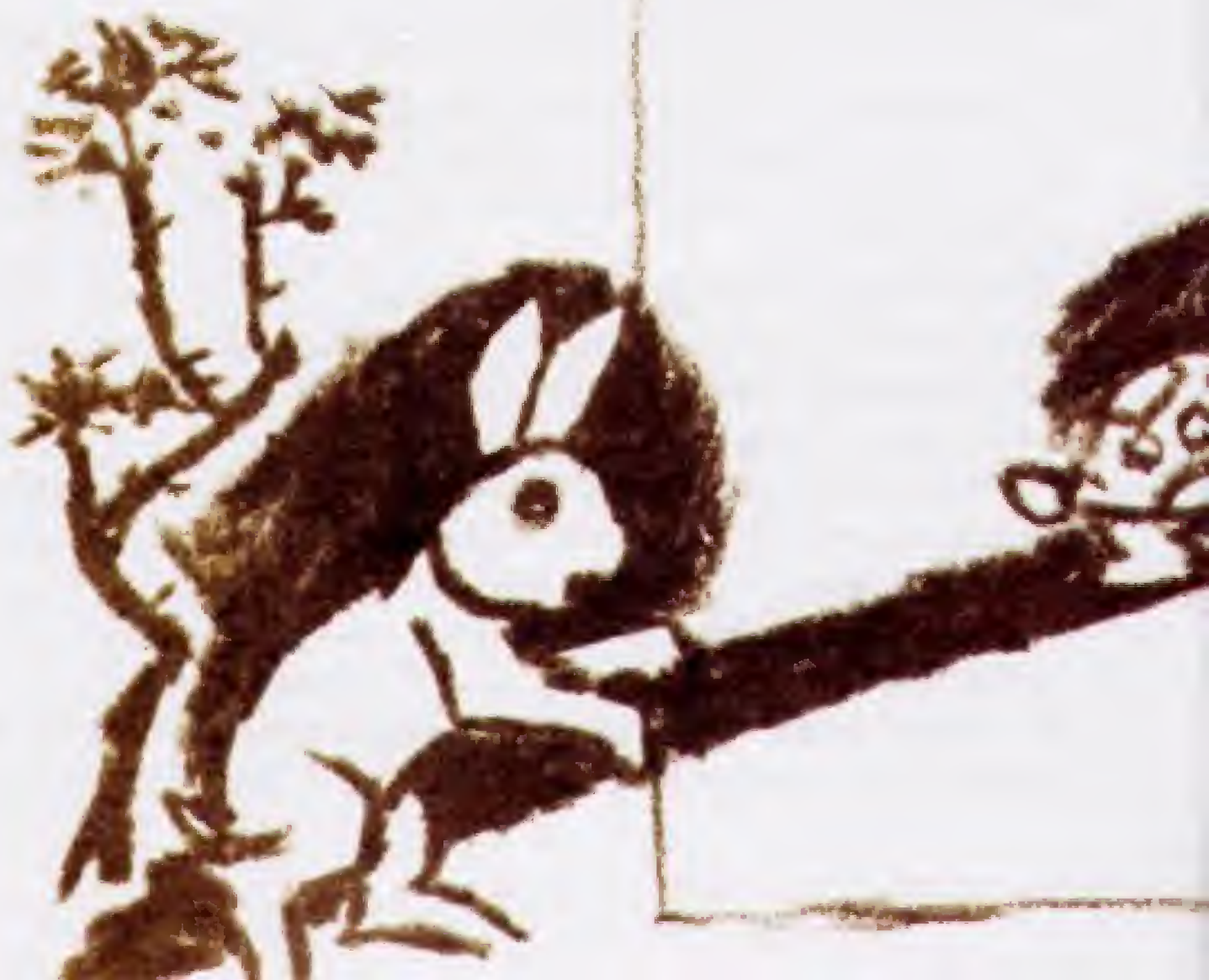
"Because you are young and I am old. I am told that this is customary in all races. Do you accept this condition?"



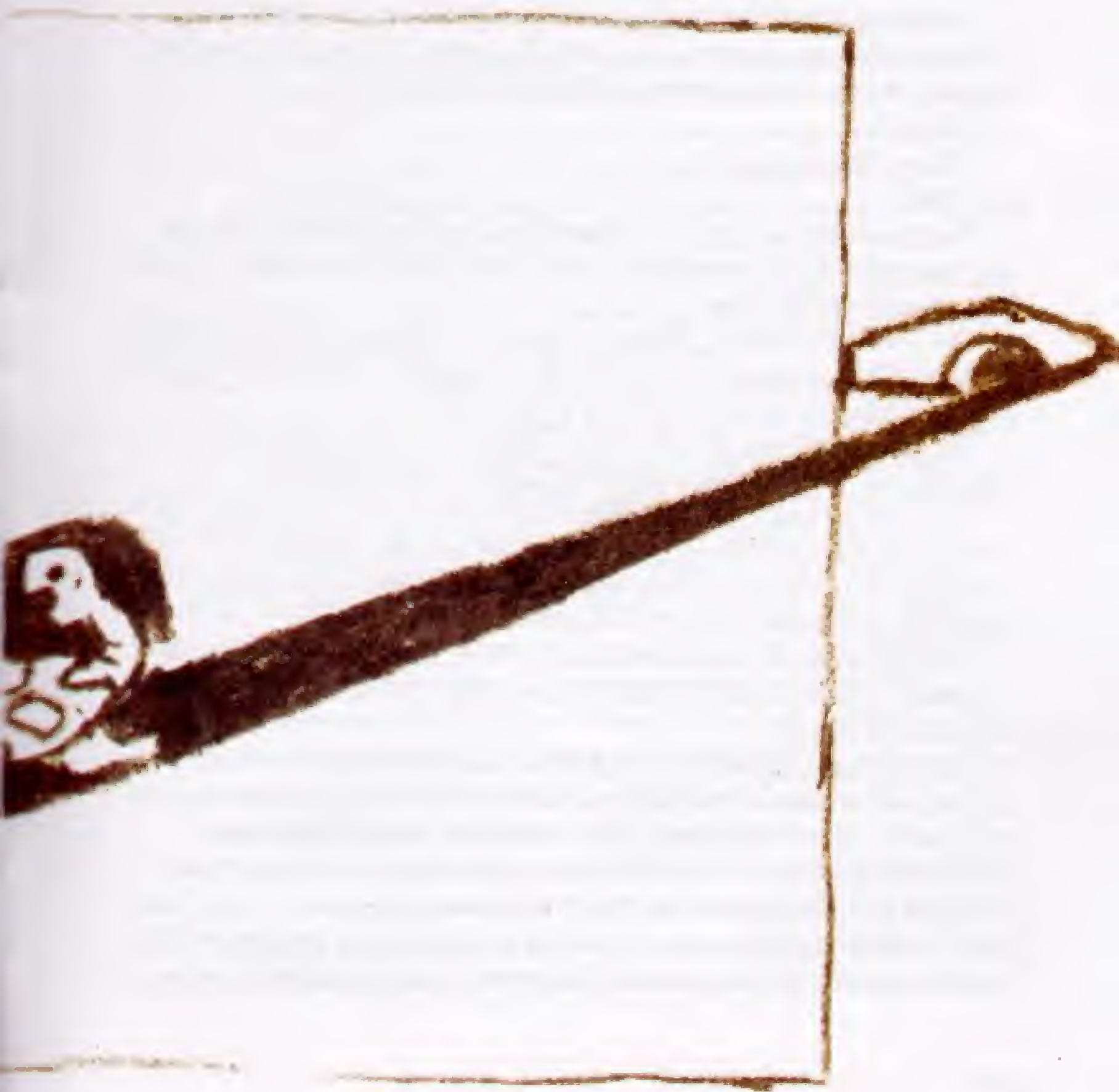
"I accept. Instead of two, I will let you start three yards ahead of me."

The Hare scampered away, leaping in the air as he went. The Tortoise entered the stream and swam out of view. He was elated that the matter would be settled; he also felt a little exercise would limber him up. He felt as light as a flower petal floating on water. He was supremely happy.

Next morning, the Hare took a repast of the tender leaves of chick-peas before he came to his rendezvous. The Tortoise had already taken









his place about 2½ yards in front of the base of the thorny acacia.

"Namastey, Prince," greeted the Tortoise.

"Namastey, Old Chap," replied the Hare with his usual impudence.

The Tortoise ignored the ill-mannered response. "I have taken my place. You go to the base of the thorny acacia and we can start off."

"When?"

"When I give the signal."

"Okay."

The two took their appointed places. The Tortoise bided his time. The Hare was full of high-strung impatience. One minute. Two minutes. Then he hopped up to the Tortoise.

The Tortoise screamed, "I have not given the signal. Are you determined to cheat? We have agreed that we will take the first step at the same time and it is I who will give that sign. Go back to your place."

The Hare went back and awaited the signal "Go". At long last, the Tortoise said "Go". The Hare took a few leaps and bounded ahead.

The Tortoise broke into his gentle trot. It was hard to tell when he was moving and when stationary; only that he was breathless and out of countenance. In a trice, the Hare was nearing the corner of the bridge. The poor Tortoise saw this through his rheumy, tearful eyes.

Very suddenly, the Hare turned sharply from his course. The Tortoise screamed, "You are cheating! Keep on the straight line or I will stop at once and call off the race."

The Tortoise's toothless, winded scream made no sense to the Hare who was well out of earshot. The Hare had another reason to ignore the Tortoise. He espied a hunter's dog coming over the bridge. All his life-force now descended to his feet. To save his soul he made a zigzag course and then crouched near the root of a tree. The dog followed the scent and got to the tree. The Hare leapt like a deer. So did the dog and caught the Hare in mid-air. It tossed the Hare another yard like a piece of rag and again closed its



jaws on him before dropping him on the ground. The Hare had a little life left in him. He tried to get away but the dog mauled him to death.

The Tortoise saw the tragedy with his own eyes. A strange silence descended on him. He could not believe that in the agony of defeat the Hare should have given up his life. For a long time he retired into his shell and sat absolutely still. When he opened his eyes it was on an empty, lonely world. When he closed his eyes he had the same vision—the dog mauling the Hare—and he would open his eyes again on an emptier, lonelier world. After a long while, he proceeded slowly towards the river. You know when a tortoise walks slowly, how slow it can be! However, it matters little how slow the pace, he gets to his destination. The Tortoise went into the stream and looked towards the bridge. Tears came into his eyes.

He said to himself: "What a tragedy! What possessed me to induce this gay and youthful fellow to an unequal combat! Shame on my great age and my experience that I was so easily nettled and nurtured so much anger in my heart! I have stained my soul with this foul act. This comes from associating with foolish people. I let my wisdom be sullied by childish, irresponsible advice. What did it really matter to me if the Hare was full of adolescent bragging? He did me no harm. It was not becoming to my age to bandy words with a stripling. I have lived for many ages; he was only a milk-sop. He is dead and I shall go on living. It were better that something happened to me and I were not tortured by these thoughts. I am amazed that with all the years of experience behind me, I did not understand that every creature lives in a world of its own. The tortoise's world is not the same as the hare's.

"What is important to one may be of no significance to the other. I cannot run on land, that poor doomed child could not move in water. Some have been endowed with one kind of faculty, others with another. Each one fulfils the destiny ascribed to him by God. It is our duty to try to know God's design, assimilate it and bow before it. That is the essence of religion. That is



the truth. Therein lie joy and salvation. The way this knowledge is attained and the manner in which one bows before His will is different with different creatures. To measure one's own knowledge against another's to confront one's own method of prayer against another's, to weigh one's own deeds against another's—all this is the way of error. It is a sin and I am guilty of that great sin."

Days come and days go. Life goes on. But the weight on the Tortoise's back does not lessen. He often broods: "This Maulana Ghufraan never comes this way. If he did, I could pour out to him the sorrow in my heart. They say that by talking of your sorrows you can ease your burden. But I do not think anything will lighten the burden of sorrow that I bear."





**Dr Zakir Husain** (1897-1969), was a renowned educationist and intellectual who contributed in the development of modern India. A recipient of India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna, in 1963, he also served as the third President of India. He spent his entire life working for the cause of education and became one of the most celebrated educational thinkers of the country.

**Khushwant Singh** (1915-2014), was a noted historian, novelist and columnist. He was one of the reputed authors of all times with a wide collection of short stories, novels and literary treasures to his credit. Among other honours, he was awarded the Padma Vibhushan, the second-highest civilian award in India in 2007.

**M F Husain** (1913-2011) or Maqbool Fida Husain, as a painter, popularised contemporary Indian art, both nationally and internationally. He chose themes that blended folk, tribal and mythological art to create contemporary art forms. For his wide repertoire of works of art he was often regarded as 'Picasso of India'.



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